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PETER FIDLER, TRADER AND SURVEYOR.
1769 TO 1822

By

J. B. TYRRELL, M.A., F.G.S., &c.

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Twenty-five years ago I published in the Proceedings of the Canadian Institute, Toronto, a short account of the surveys made by David Thompson in North Western America during the latter part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. My researches at the time also showed the existence of another surveyor named Peter Fidler who was in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company at the same time, but very little could be learned about him, or of the extent of the work which he accomplished.

Since that time Doctor Bryce has told us something about the man, and the extraordinary will which he left at his death, in which, after bequeathing his Note-books and Journals to the Hudson's Bay Company, and making other legacies, he directed all the balance of his estate, after his youngest son had come of age, to be placed in the public funds, and to be allowed to accumulate there until August 16th, 1969, the 200th anniversary of his birth, when the accumulated sum was to be given to the heir of his youngest son, Peter Fidler. Mr. James White has also shown us the map which was made by Mr. G. Taylor for Mr. J. G. McTavish to illustrate the surveys made by Mr. Fidler in Western Canada but the exact extent of these surveys, the times when he made them, and the records which he kept of the conditions of life as he saw them in the various parts of the country in which he happened to be travelling or residing in that strenuous period of struggle between the English and Canadian trading Companies, when success in the fur trade depended in no small degree on fighting ability, have remained unknown.

Such information as we had about the man was just enough to whet our appetites for more, and students of western history have been keenly on the lookout for notes and memoranda which would supply the missing data, and would furnish a record of the work done by this pioneer in the exploration of the northern and western portions of our country.

Last summer, while at York Factory, on Hudson Bay, in the capacity of Commissioner for the Government of the Province of Ontario, I had the good fortune to find, and through the kindness of Mr. Ray, to be allowed to inspect, several of the original notebooks kept by Peter Fidler while he was in Western Canada. These gave accounts

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(Read May 28, 1913)

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of his life during the years, 1796, 1797, 1800, 1803 to 1805, 1806, 1807, and 1821. There was also a meteorological Register kept by Peter Fidler himself from 1793 to 1807, giving the places at which he lived during those fourteen years, the readings of the thermometer twice a day, the direction and force of the wind, and general remarks on the climate, as well as occasional notes on remarkable occurrences in the country at that time. In addition to these books written by himself some other papers and journals were seen which gave some information about him and the life which he led.

From these data I am able to offer a brief sketch of Peter Fidler's life in Western Canada, and a very few items of interest out of his extended and detailed journals.

Peter Fidler was born at Bolsover, Derbyshire, on the sixteenth of August 1769, and entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company when he was nineteen years old, which would be in 1788. During the following winter he probably remained at York Factory, but in 1789 he went to Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River, where he remained in company with David Thompson and Phillip Turner, the former of whom was one year his junior, while the latter was an enthusiastic surveyor and astronomer who had been in the service of the Company for a number of years, and who doubtless had much to do with the training of the two young men who were thus thrown in contact with him.

Where he spent the following year is not known, but it is reported, perhaps truly, that in the summer of 1791 he accompanied Phillip Turner on his expedition to survey Lake Athabasca, in which case he doubtless spent the winter of 1791-1792 with his chief at old Fort Chipewyan on the south side of the lake. Here he would have been the guest of Roderick Mackenzie of the North-West Company, though, being a young man and merely acting as assistant to Mr. Turner, he is not mentioned in any of the correspondence of Roderick Mackenzie which I have seen.

In 1792 he was back again on the Saskatchewan River at Buckingham House, the most western trading post of the Hudson's Bay Company at that time. From that post he travelled southwestward across the plains to the foot of Chief Mountain in the main range of the Rocky Mountains, and not far north of the present boundary line between the United States and Canada. Here he spent the winter, doubtless in a camp of Blackfeet or Piegan Indians, and in the following summer returned to Buckingham House, after which he ascended the Saskatchewan River for about one hundred miles, his courses and positions for these two years being laid down on Arrowsmith's map of North-Western America, made in 1795, with corrections to 1796.

After having spent four years in the Saskatchewan country, through which he probably made surveys, though the character and extent of the surveys are not yet known, he descended the river to York Factory where he started a series of meteorological observations, the results of which for the next fourteen years, with the exact places at which they were taken, we now have, so that for that time there is no uncertainty as to his movements.

From 1793 to September 5th, 1795, he remained at York Factory acting as a clerk and trader at that post and receiving a salary of £25 a year for his services.

On the 26th of June 1794 the following remark is entered in his register:—"South Branch House burnt and plundered by the Fall Indians, 3 men, 1 woman and 2 children murdered, and 2 carried away as slaves, young women. Canadians killed and wounded 14 of these Indians in ye attack." On August 11th of the same year there is the following entry, "8 Canoes of Englishmen arrived from Cumberland House with the news of the S. Branch. Mr. Vandereil with them."

In a letter written by Joseph Colen and his associates at York Factory to the Governor of the Company in England the following brief statement is made about the destruction of South Branch and Manchester Houses, with regard to both of which attacks we have hitherto been very much in the dark; "The natives have been and are very hostile to your Honour's Servants inland. They attacked Manchester House last Fall, where only seven resided, plundered the house of every article of trading goods, which they carried away. The men escaped only with the clothes on their backs. The easy conquest of valuable booty obtained at Manchester induced a vast number of the same tribes to attack the South Branch on the 24th of June last, where they killed Magnus Annel, Hugh Brough and Wm. Fea, plundered and set fire to the house, and carried off in triumph the scalps of the unfortunate sufferers. Mr. Vanderial escaped their fury by concealing himself in an old vault, and afterwards directed his way to Cumberland. It is much to be feared that Buckingham House ere this has shared the same fate."

Fidler's Note is more exact as to the fate of most of the inhabitants, and probably his date of the 26th of June would be more exact than Colen's of the 24th of the same month.

On the 5th of September, 1795, he left York Factory, and on the 21st of October reached a place which he calls Charlton House on the upper waters of the Assiniboine River in latitude $51^{\circ} 47'$, where he remained for the winter. Two years later a trading post in the immediate vicinity owned by the North-West Company was visited by

David Thompson, and still later it was the home of Daniel Harmon for several years.

On March 30th, 1796, he left Charlton House, and on April 3rd he arrived at Swan River House near the mouth of the Swan River in North-western Manitoba. After remaining here for a little more than a month to allow the ice to break up on the rivers and lakes he left Swan River house and embarked for Cumberland on the Saskatchewan River, where he arrived on the 23rd of May, having doubtless made the journey by the way of the Mossy Portage from the north end of Lake Winnipegosis to Cedar Lake.

He remained at Cumberland house throughout the summer, until the 25th of September. During this time we have not only his brief meteorological record, but we have his extended journal which is full of interesting material about the life in the country at that time. All the employees in charge of posts of the Hudson's Bay Company were instructed to keep daily journals, and in my travels through the Western country I have had opportunities of inspecting many of these old manuscript books most of which closely reflect the minds and characters of the men who wrote them. Many of them are simply monotonous records of wind and weather and the daily rounds of life, with most of the interesting and extraordinary events omitted, probably for the reason that such events were so widely known and deeply felt that it seemed needless to record them. But Fidler's journals are good exceptions to such monotony. They are not diffuse, but they give clear statistical accounts of life at the time and in the places where he was writing and enter with perfect faithfulness the coming and going of his companions or competitors in the fur trade, and of the Indians with whom they traded.

The following extract is his account of summary justice as administered to the Indians on the Saskatchewan by the Partners of the North-West Company, and at the same time it is a good illustration of Fidler's matter-of-fact style of describing even the most tragic occurrences.

"June 2nd [1796] Thursday. Early this morning two Canoes of Indians arrived loaded with meat for our house. These two men was known to be the principals in the murder of one of the Canad. men this last winter at Isle a la Crosse. Just as one had stepped out of his Canoe (i.e., Charles's Brother alias Beardy) he was immediately seized by the Canadians that was ready to take him when he landed, and they hauled him into their house. The other, called Little Gut, had not disembarked when the other man was seized, and he immediately pushed his Canoe from the Shore and padled with all the haste he could to get out of the Canadians way, they immediately manned one of their Canoes with

seven men besides Mr. Wm. McKay and pursued him, also sending several men along shore armed to prevent his landing. They overtook him near the old house where they fired and shot him dead thro the head, he finding himself so closely pursued that he had got all his Powder and Ball emptied into a roggan loose before him ready to fire upon those in the French Canoe, and he was just turning round his Canoe to take sight at the Canadians when Mr. McKay shot him dead, he had a deal of meat in the Canoe when he was shot, that he was bringing to our house to trade. They brought him back in the Canoe Dead and laid him upon the platform in their yard and went to question Charles's brother. He lay in the house with his hands tied and foaming at the mouth and appeared quite insensible. They then carried him out and placed him a little while by the side of him who lay dead, but he seemed not to take the least notice. When they had carried him without the gates he began to sing very loud, and continued till he came to the tree where he was to be hung; they then made him confess everything with the rope about his neck, which he did, and informed of every one who was accomplices with him, he said that he was the sole cause of the death of the Canadian, and seemed perfectly satisfied that he deserved this ignominious death. After getting every information from him they desired him if he had anything to say concerning his wife and children. He said he had nothing to say on that head but recommend his eldest Son to the protection of Mr. Sutherland which was the only request he made, they then hauled him up about 5 feet from the Ground, he had not hung 3 minutes when he gave a great struggle and the rope broke that he was suspended by, but he never afterwards moved, but they hung him up again as soon as the rope could be adjusted and let him hang one hour afterwards before they cut him down, they then took both him that was shot and him that was hung and hauled them a little way from their house and let them lay."

"Packed 22 bundles of furs and set 3 men to make a Grave for those people that suffered this day, in the afternoon buried them both in one Grave. There was only one Indian man present at the execution and a boy, and they appeared very much terrified and shocked, never seeing or hearing of the like before. The above will be a means of deterring the Indians in future and prevent them from illuring or killing any this while to come. Gave the Indians some liquor to drown away melancholy."

"June 3rd. Friday. Six Canoes of Indians arrived and only brought one Swan, they came from the Swampy river where those came from that was executed yesterday. Sent 2 men to fetch the Canoe that was upset when the Indian man was shot. Gave the Indians a treat, and paid the man's wife for the Canoe that was shot yesterday."

"June 4th. Saturday. At 3 a.m. Messrs Sutherland, Tomison and Swain arrived in 16 canoes & 1 boat with 212 bundles of furs and 60 bags of Pimmican also 2 kegs of Fatt."

"June 5th. Sunday. At 8 a.m. Messrs. Rod. McKenzie & Finley arrived in a light canoe from the Athapescow, they have been only 17 days on their passage. At 1 p.m. they again embarked for the great carrying place, their loaded canoes they expect here in about 14 days."

The name of the Canadian who had been killed was not given in Fidler's Journal, but it is probable that it was Robert Thompson who had been a successful fur trader in the country north of Cumberland House for some years previous to that time, and who is known to have been killed by an Indian some time during the winter of 1795-6.

Mr. Wm. Tomison, who was the "Chief Inland" for the Hudson's Bay Company, remained at Cumberland House for most of that summer. At the same time Mr. Porter was in charge of the adjoining Trading Post of the North West Company.

On the 27th of September, 1796, Fidler left Cumberland House, where he had spent the summer, and embarked up the Saskatchewan for his old home at Buckingham House, where he arrived on the 19th of October and where he spent the following winter, with the exception of a short trip which he made to visit his friend George Sutherland at Edmonton. While here his salary was raised to £30 a year.

Mr. McDonald was in charge of the adjoining Trading Post of the North-West Company, which was known as Fort George, and Fidler keeps a record of the White men and Indians who visited both his own post and that of his rival.

During the winter boats were built for carrying out the furs that had been collected both here and at Edmonton.

The winter was an exceedingly cold one, possibly the coldest that has ever been known in North-Western Canada, and in the spring of 1797 the ice, which usually breaks up in Lake Winnipeg about the First of June, was still solid on parts of the north end of that Lake on the First of July.

On the 19th of May, 1797, Fidler embarked from Buckingham House for York Factory, which he reached about the middle of July, and from which place he got back to Cumberland House on the 20th of September.

This post was to be his home for the next two years, but we know little about his life, except such brief remarks as are found in his meteorological journal. In the records at York Factory for these years he is entered in the list of employees as a trader at a salary of £50 a year. In the year 1799 it had been determined, if possible, to compete with the North-West Company on the upper waters of the Churchill River and on the Athabasca and Mackenzie Rivers, and instructions were

sent to Peter Fidler at Cumberland to proceed up the Churchill River and to establish a trading post on Lac la Biche. Accordingly, Mr. Fidler set out and arrived at Green Lake on the 3rd of September, where he left Hugh Sabeston in charge of a trading post which he called Bolsover House, while he himself went on to Lac la Biche, on the north-east corner of which, in latitude $54^{\circ} 46'$, he built a house, which he called Greenwich House. Here he spent the winter, breaking the time by a Christmas visit to Edmonton on the Saskatchewan River.

In the spring of 1800 he descended the Churchill River to Cumberland House. On August 6th of the same year he ascended the South Branch of the Saskatchewan River to the junction of the Bow and Red Deer Rivers, where he built Chesterfield House on the north side of the river in latitude $50^{\circ} 55'$, and where he remained for two years, though he visited York Factory in the interval.

Both the North-West and the X Y Companies appear to have accompanied Fidler up the South Saskatchewan river and to have built Trading Posts in the immediate vicinity of that of the Hudson's Bay Company, the detachment from the latter Company being in charge of Mr. Bellew, probably the Pierre Belleau who was a well-known employee of that Company at the time.

The Indians who traded at this post were Blackfeet and Fall Indians.

In 1802 Fidler left Chesterfield House on April 12th, and on June 23rd he arrived at York Factory in a large canoe with three men and seven bundles of furs. During his sojourn at Chesterfield House his salary had been advanced to £70 a year.

For twenty-four years the Hudson's Bay Company had now been watching their rivals, the North-West Company, bringing down their bales of furs from Lake Athabasca and the Mackenzie River, but so far they had been utterly unable to participate in that trade. Finally they determined to break into it at any cost, and the Chief at York Factory gave instructions to Mr. Fidler that he must follow the North-West Company northward to Athabasca Lake. Accordingly in the summer of 1802 Mr. Fidler, with Thomas Swain as assistant and with a proper complement of canoemen, started northwestward from Cumberland House and reached Athabasca Lake about the end of September. Here, instead of building on the south shore beside the trading post of his rivals, the North-West Company, he picked on another spot at the west end of the lake, where Fort Chipewyan is at present situated, and built a small trading post which he called Nottingham House and in which he settled down for the winter, while he sent Mr. Swain up Peace River for a considerable distance to build beside another

trading post of the North-West Company. Mr. Fidler remained at Nottingham House throughout the winter, but Swain's post on the Peace River, which he had called Mansfield House, had to be abandoned in January, as the Indians refused to work for him, and without them he was unable to obtain sufficient provisions to sustain his men.

The winter was an unprofitable one for Mr. Fidler, and when the time came for taking his returns to York Factory he had only six packs of furs to show for his whole season's trade. However, on the 19th of May he left Nottingham with three canoes and nine men in the hope that when he returned in the following autumn he would be able to do better than he had done the previous winter.

On the 12th of September Mr. Fidler returned with the same number of canoes and men, the canoes loaded with trading goods. Four days later Swain left Nottingham House to build another trading post, this time on the Slave River, twenty-five miles above Great Slave Lake, which he dignified with the name of Chiswick House.

The winter of 1803-4 was hardly more profitable than the previous one, and when the time came, on the 21st of May, for Peter Fidler to leave for Cumberland House with his Annual returns he took Mr. Swain and two canoes with him, but he had very little more to show than he had had the year before. On the 24th of July he arrived at Cumberland House. After waiting here for a few days to discharge his small cargo of furs and to get an outfit of trading goods and some new men, he left Cumberland on the 3rd of August and started back for Lake Athabasca where he arrived on the 11th of September, finding, as he says in his journal, all well. On the 16th, after a delay of five days at this place, Mr. Swain continued on to Great Slave Lake, where he built a trading post on Moose Island, ten miles west of the western mouth of Slave River.

On the 24th of the following May, 1805, leaving Mr. Swain in charge of Nottingham House, he again embarked for Cumberland with seven bundles of furs all told, four from Great Slave Lake and three from the headquarters at Athabasca Lake. He took with him two canoes, with four men in each canoe, in order that he might make a quick trip to Cumberland, where he arrived on the 18th of June and where David Thompson, his old companion at the same place fifteen years before had arrived two days before him. After a stay of three days he continued on to Oxford House, where he arrived on the 1st of July. On the 3rd the Governor arrived from York Factory, but it was the 17th before the supplies for his trade arrived and it was the 19th before he was able to start again for Athabasca Lake.

On the 2nd of August he arrived at Cumberland House and on the 6th he and Mr. Sutherland left for the north-west, the latter being

destined to spend the winter at Beaver River. On the 12th, while passing through Pelican Lake, "David Thompson, in a small canoe, two Indian boys, and one Canadian passed us just before we put up. We did not speak together. He is going to Cumberland House." Why these two men, who had so many ideals in common, would now pass each other in the wilderness without speaking is not known. With a man of Thompson's kindly disposition there must have been some strong reason for his estrangement from Fidler.

The following is David Thompson's reference to this meeting, "August 12th, Sunday At 7½ P.M. we met 4 H.B. canoes, each 4 men, with two clerks. They [have] a woman also per canoe. 2 of them for Isle a la Crosse and 2 for Athabasca as we suppose. Old La Rivière was following them, gave him two pieces of dried meat."

On the 24th of August he arrived at Isle a la Crosse House, where he learnt that the Green Lake House had been burned down by John Tapert. On the 26th, leaving Mr. Sutherland with two canoes to go up to Green Lake, he started for Lake Athabasca, where he arrived on the 11th of September, and where he says, "The French have destroyed our garden, stolen our canoes, made a house to watch us, and put up two tents close to our house, not four yards from it, to keep every Indian away. Got here this summer 80 MB and traded the dry meat of eight moose, but at a very heavy expense."

Here his journal ends and we are thrown back on the meteorological record and on some chance references in letters for information, but it is clear that the winter was an unfortunate one, and so, early in June of the following year (1806), Fidler abandoned Nottingham House and the whole Athabasca country to his opponents and left for his old home at Cumberland, a beaten, but not altogether a disheartened trader.

The following winter was spent at Cumberland House, with Daniel Harman, of the North-West Company, in charge of the adjoining trading post for that Company. The winter seems to have been a pleasant and enjoyable one and the two traders spent many an evening together over a game of cards or in some other light amusement, and when provisions at any time failed the one seemed to supply the other in a liberal and open-handed way.

With the spring of 1807 our meteorological register, which has been guiding us infallibly from place to place as Fidler travelled from one trading post to another, comes to an end, but one of his journals continues two months beyond the date of this register. In it we find, opposite the First of June, the following note:—"Got everything ready to embark to the Athabasca to morrow," and under the 2nd, "Got

underway at twelve. James Morrowick, William Dunnet, John Ross, and myself in a small canoe with six bags of Pimmican to pass by the Deers Lake and from thence to the Athabasca," and on the 6th, when the Journal ends, he put up at the Frog Carrying Place.

From there it is not quite certain how far he travelled, but as Arrowsmith's map of 1811 shows that a survey has been made of the route as far west as the east end of Lake Athabasca, it is probable that he made that survey and returned before the autumn set in.

In the end of the journal from which I have just quoted there is also a short meteorological register at Swan River from November 1 to 10, 1807, which appears to be in Fidler's hand-writing and which would indicate that he had returned to that post before the winter set in. The winter of 1807-8 may therefore, in default of other evidence, be assumed to have been spent at Swan River.

There is some indication in casual references and letters that the winter of 1808-1809 was spent at Churchill, and that the summer of 1809 was spent in making a survey of Churchill River from its mouth up to Isle a la Crosse, for records of astronomical observations are given as having been taken that summer at Isle a la Crosse and also at the Hudson's Bay Company's post called Clapham House on Reindeer Lake.

His whereabouts during the years from 1809 to 1811 are not known, but it is possible that for part of this time he was continuing his surveys on the Paukathakuskow and Seal Rivers to the north of Churchill River in order to find, if possible, some easier route to the upper Churchill and Athabasca countries than that used by the traders of the North-West Company, but it is evident that no such route was discovered, although the lower portion of Churchill River was regularly used as a trading route up as far as Indian Lake and Three Point Lake until the union of the Companies in 1821.

In 1811 he would appear to have left the North country and to have moved southward to the Red River settlement, and it is not improbable that during 1811 and 1812 he was at Brandon House at the mouth of Souris River.

In the summer of 1812 he seems to have been at some place on Pembina River, while during the winter of 1812-13 he was in charge at Brandon House.

In the following year his whereabouts are uncertain, but from 1814 to 1816 he has again at Brandon House, drawing a salary of £100 a year, and 1820 and 1821 were spent at Fort Dauphin, west of Dauphin Lake.

In 1822 he is said to have died at Norway House at the age of fifty-three.

He was a man five feet nine and a half inches in height and apparently of good physique, but his life was shortened by the free use of brandy and rum which were so plentiful among the traders in the West at that time. He had four sons at least, namely, Thomas, George, Charles and Peter. Thomas was employed by the Hudson's Bay Company as a writer and George as a boatman. In the accounts for 1821 the father makes the following remarks with regard to these two men.—“Thomas very handy, rather addicted to rum, George active, a Moose hunter.”

Fidler himself was a hard worker, but was of an irascible disposition with comparatively little consideration for the weaknesses or failings of others. He was a diligent student and fond of reading. In the Library at York is a manuscript book of mathematical problems worked out by him, and a large number of the printed books in the Library are inscribed with his name and have evidently been contributed to the Library by him. Most of these are on mathematical subjects of some kind, many of them being such books as “The Nautical Almanac,” “The Diary Companion, being a supplement to The Ladies’ Diary,” “The Gentlemen’s Diary, or The Mathematical Repository.” Others are on Biblical chronology. In addition to which there is the “Monthly Magazine” for a number of years.

In those of his journals which I had the privilege of inspecting there is only one record of a survey, namely, that of the South Saskatchewan River from the point where it joins the North Saskatchewan up to Chesterfield House, but it is quite clear that a number of other surveys were made by him, for the map of the North-West Territories, which is now in the possession of Mr. White, of the Commission of Conservation, shows indubitable evidence of such surveys.

At the present time it has not been possible for me to give more than a few notes from the journals of this old pioneer trader and explorer, but they may throw a little additional light on some of the early history of Western Canada.

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